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SUBJECT: AFGHANS AND INDIANS ENCOURAGED BY BILATERAL RELATIONSHIP

REF: NEW DELHI 1521

Classified By: PolCouns Geoff Pyatt, for Reasons 1.4 (B, D)

¶1. (C) Summary: Afghan Ambassador to India Khalili expressed strong appreciation for Indian assistance to his country in a May 17 meeting with PolCouns and Poloff, and told us that PM Manmohan Singh will visit Kabul in late June. In Khalili's view, the GOI welcomes Afghanistan's strategic partnership with the US as a positive development for Indian interests. MEA Joint Secretary (Pakistan, Afghanistan, Iran) Dilip Sinha agreed that the US presence in Afghanistan is necessary, but cautioned that the GOI hopes to see a gradual effort to increase ANA capabilities and reduce the international security footprint in Afghanistan. Indian community development assistance in poppy-growing areas is on track, but the GOI is concerned about security of Indian workers. End Summary.

Positive Indian Influence in Afghanistan

¶2. (SBU) Recently returned to New Delhi after six weeks in Afghanistan, Khalili was "very encouraged" by the progress he witnessed there, both in development and political stability.

He praised Indian assistance efforts in Afghanistan, noting that the aid projects, although sometimes slow, have earned the goodwill of the Afghan people. Khalili contrasted the positive attitude toward Indians with the Afghans' distrust of Pakistan, commenting that Pakistan could do more than India to assist Afghanistan but the population would still be skeptical.

¶3. (SBU) "Everyone in Kabul" was excited by the Pul-i-Khumri electric transmission line project, Khalili said, including the Minister of Energy Ismael Khan. Although the GOA had been disappointed to discover that completion was not expected for two years, "everyone is keen to see it done," and other GOA Ministries (including the Ministry of Defense) had pledged assistance to support the project in the difficult mountainous terrain. Khalili reported that both Indian Ambassador to Afghanistan Rakesh Sood and MEA Joint Secretary Dilip Sinha had assured him of India's intention to

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complete the line as soon as possible.

¶4. (C) Although not yet publicly announced, Indian PM Manmohan Singh will visit Afghanistan in late June, following Afghan FM Abdullah's trip to New Delhi on June 10, Khalili told us, linking the visits to India's sincere commitment to Afghan reconstruction. Khalili predicted that the Indian PM will stop in Kabul and possibly Kandahar on his trip, but MEA's Dilip Sinha indicated that the governments have not yet decided the details. Overall, the GOI is very committed to playing a positive role in Afghan reconstruction, but bureaucratic obstacles retard its good intentions, Khalili stated. He reported that President Karzai has raised with Pakistan the possibility of transit rights for Indian humanitarian goods, but was skeptical that Islamabad would yield on this issue for now.

India Appreciates American Partnership

¶5. (C) According to Khalili, his Indian interlocutors have welcomed President Karzai's recently announced intention to seek a long-term "strategic partnership" with the US. Khalili reported that Indian Ambassador Rakesh Sood had told him that close ties between the US and Afghanistan would leave less room for Pakistani and Iranian influence, which would be useful for both Afghanistan and India. MEA J/S Sinha echoed this theme in a May 18 meeting with PolCouns and Poloff, observing that the GOI recognizes the need for the international community, including the US, to provide security in Afghanistan. That being said, he expressed hope that eventually Afghan forces would replace international troops as they withdraw their presence to small cantonments.

Riots and Security

¶6. (C) MEA's Sinha sympathized with the "sensitive" situation of US troops in Afghanistan, and opined that the mix of a foreign presence, deep-seated religious passions,

and radical troublemakers kept the potential for anti-Western demonstrations high. Echoing Khalili's comments, he stated that India was working hard to maintain a positive public image in Afghanistan, noting that the demonstrations included nothing that was anti-Indian, but that "forces" in Afghanistan were keen to divert attention from India's cooperative assistance efforts and turn opinion against India. If that happened, he worried, Indian assistance workers in Afghanistan would be endangered.

¶17. (C) Sinha was sympathetic about the Pakistani dilemma in Afghanistan, speculating that anti-Pakistan demonstrations had been stirred up by tribal elements opposed to Musharraf's crackdown on radical Islamists at home. This generous interpretation was completely devoid of the zero-sum arguments that characterized past GOI assessments of the GOP role in Afghanistan.

¶18. (C) Sinha disagreed strongly with attempts to "rehabilitate" former Taliban, arguing that "Taliban are by definition extremists," as bad as any regime in history. Conceding that a "witch hunt" for low-level former Taliban would be excessive, he firmly reiterated his opposition to including "hard core" Taliban in the government, comparing this to rehabilitation of German Nazis or representatives of the Pol Pot regime in Cambodia.

Moving Ahead on Community Development

¶19. (C) The GOI has identified two districts in which it will implement a pilot program to support alternative sources of income for poppy farmers (reftel), Sinha reported, and teams will soon visit Afghanistan to prepare for implementation. The districts selected were not "hard-core" opium production areas, but had a good chance for success at eradicating poppy cultivation. The programs would help poppy farmers switch to other profitable agricultural products with which Indians had experience in cultivation (for instance in Punjab), and also train them in skills for cottage industry manufacturing, providing small items for local needs without requiring large scale infrastructure of electricity or roads for market access. Sinha emphasized that civilian staff operating out of the Indian consulates in Kandahar and Jalalabad, not military personnel, would run the programs and therefore a secure operating environment and goodwill toward India were essential to their success.

Comment

¶10. (C) Both the Afghan Ambassador and the Indian MEA are pleased with their growing ties, particularly in development assistance. We should see more on this theme if Manmohan Singh visits Kabul in June. Both the MEA and the Afghans tell us that such a visit would be the first by an Indian leader in many decades, but the timing may succumb to Manmohan Singh's busy travel calendar, including a mid-July trip to Washington. While Khalili claimed to be more optimistic than ever about Afghanistan's prospects for stability, Sinha was much more concerned about extremists' potential to cause violence and disrupt GOI development programs. Although Sinha stopped short of endorsing a US-Afghanistan strategic partnership, he did express satisfaction with the effect of the US presence there.

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